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IEPA weighs legal action on waste disposal landfill

By J.G. MATT

Of the News-Democrat

State officials are considering legal action against a St. Clair County waste disposal landfill that may pose a pollution threat to land and water near the site.

Illinois Environmental Protection Agency officials may decide this week to file suit to force changes in operations or possibly shut down the Milam landfill near East St. Louis. The 255-acre site is the largest refuse disposal facility in Southern Illinois, IEPA officials said. Between 10 and 20 people are employed at the site.

The facility, operated by SCA Services of Illinois in Granite City, is located near the junction of Interstate 55 and Illinois 203, near the Madison County line.

The landfill has been the target of two IEPA lawsuits in the past, and has serious

operational problems, officials said. "I don't know if the site can ever be operated in compliance with the rules," said Joe Podlewski, an IEPA attorney who is handling the case. But he said there is a difference of opinion among IEPA officials on the site's suitability as a landfill.

"We're just weighing all our options," Podlewski said. The options include fines or forcing the landfill to close, but "if the problems can be solved outside of filing suit, that works to everyone's benefit," he said.

The manager of the landfill said he knows nothing about possible IEPA action in connection with the facility. Company officials at SCA's St. Louis office could not be reached for comment.

State and regional IEPA officials plan to meet this week to discuss the problems and

decide on a course of action, Podlewski said. He would not speculate on the possibility of closing the landfill.

Of major concern to the IEPA is the waterlogged nature of the soil where the landfill is located. "You don't have to go far down to hit water," Podlewski said. As a result, waste materials dumped at the site could pollute ground water in surrounding areas.

Perry Mann, a geologist with the IEPA's regional office in Collinsville, said wells drilled near the landfill to monitor underground water pollution show high concentrations of various pollutants, especially in areas just west of the dump. The pollutants found in those wells greatly exceed state water quality standards, and are markedly higher than samples taken from wells on the east side of the landfill, he said.

Underground water generally moves from east to west in the area, and the samples point to pollution from the landfill, he said.

Materials dumped at the site over a 25 to 30-year period cover a wide range of wastes, including general refuse, industrial wastes, and sludge from sewage treatment plants.

None of the materials allowed to be dumped at the site are classified "hazardous" under federal regulations, although some were defined as hazardous under previous state rules, Mann said. The state now has federal standards in defining "hazardous" wastes. There is no evidence that highly-toxic materials such as PCBs or dioxins were dumped at the site, IEPA officials said.

But authorities are worried about the

disposal of several hundred drums of industrial wastes at the site in 1978. The drums were placed in a trench that is probably waterlogged, they said. "They're probably sitting in water, and they (the drums) will deteriorate over a period of time," Podlewski said.

Mann described most of the materials in the drums as paint waste sludge — a substance left over from flushing spray-painting equipment at automobile assembly lines. Other drums contain paint thinners and some have other industrial wastes that were not allowed in the site under permits issued to SCA.

If the drums deteriorate, heavy metals such as chromium and lead could wash into underground water, Mann said. In high concentrations, the metals could be toxic.

The IEPA ordered SCA to stop disposing

of the drums shortly after the trench was dug in 1978, but IEPA regional officials in Collinsville estimate that between 900 and 1,200 drums were dumped into the site, and remain there. The company built a 10-foot clay "liner" around the trench to prevent water saturation of the site, but water comes up through sandy soil beneath the drums, Mann said.

The water problem has been worsened by an apparent rise in the level of underground water in the area, believed to be caused by a decrease in industrial activity in the area. Industries that have moved out of the area formerly pumped large quantities of water from the ground, a situation that kept the level of ground water down.

Since industries have left the area, the water level has risen all the way to the soil surface, Mann said.

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Washington calls dump spread foul

WASHINGTON — The city may join the fight against Waste Management of Illinois' attempts to dump industrial wastes at the Tazewell County Landfill.

The City Council has been asked to support efforts by East Peoria and several other communities to stop proposed landfill expansion, said Mayor Ron Marshall during last night's council meeting.

"The problem is not the landfill but what is going to be dumped in it," said Marshall. "The council should draft a resolution supporting East Peoria and the citizens fighting Waste Management."

The landfill, operated on 70 acres off of Farmdale Road on the East Peoria line, would be expanded to an adjacent 90-acre site, according to company proposals.

Opponents contend liquid wastes dumped at the site will contaminate the Sangamon aquifer. That aquifer supplies water

to several Tri-County communities including, Washington, Peoria, East Peoria, Peoria Heights and portions of Pekin and Morton.

"These wastes could in time mean the destruction of that water," said Marshall. "I don't feel there is a lot of citizen support for this thing."

"I think it may be a case of a state agency which sees itself as a big brother who tries to take care of everybody else," he said. "I think we should support East Peoria and those citizens fighting it."

Council action on the issue is expected at its Aug. 2 meeting.

In other business, the council:

- Received petitions from residents complaining about flooding from three creeks running behind Birchwood Drive.

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